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The Age of Blossoms: Mrs. Chan's Transformation in *In the Mood for Love*

More than anything else, Wong Kar-wai's 2000 film *In the Mood for Love* chronicles a relationship through the repeated use of motifs. By bombarding the viewer with recurring images and sounds—including clocks, outfits and music—one can examine the interactions between Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan through a multifaceted prism encapsulating both past and present. When a new scene presents itself, it proves impossible to ignore how the doomed lovers' dynamic has developed since the last time a particular motif was introduced. Therefore, when one notices the abundance of Mrs. Chan's tight-fitting floral dresses, connections to other floral imagery are forged and shed light on her motives and actions. During the proverbial winter of an unsatisfying marriage, Mrs. Chan's fulfilling, albeit unconsummated relationship with Mr. Chow provides an opportunity for growth, culminating in a new life as a strong, independent woman.

Before the action of the film even takes place, a precursory epigraph displayed onscreen vaguely compares Mrs. Chan to a flower. “It is a restless moment,” it flashes. “She has kept her head lowered to give him a chance to come closer.” Before the film evidences that this statement refers to Mrs. Chan, the image placed in the viewer's head is an act of submission to another person's affections. Like a beautiful flower waiting for someone to bend down and smell or gaze upon it, the woman described bows humbly before a shy man, awaiting his advances. “But he could not, for lack of courage,” the epigraph continues. “She turns and walks away.” As a result of the man's hesitance, the woman never gets deflowered, in a sense. She remains pure and untouched.

How fitting, then, that Mrs. Chan's fated entrance into Mrs. Suen's Hong Kong apartment

in 1962 immediately follows the epigraph, causing the viewer to associate her with the woman described only seconds before. Furthermore, she sports a slim, elaborate and colorful floral dress, an astonishing blue piece with roses in full bloom that makes several notable appearances in the film. One cannot help but account for her indisputable beauty, and the floral dress serves to both highlight her sexual appeal and more importantly suggest a graceful elegance, not unlike a flower in full bloom. This connotation calls to mind a passage from the Gospel of Matthew, in which Jesus asks of his disciples at the Sermon on the Mount, “Why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin” (*King James Bible*, Matt. 6:28). Though Mrs. Chan's dress is clearly sophisticated and likely expensive, her natural beauty betrays no contrivance or superficiality, likening her to the lilies of the field which do not worry themselves with affectation, but rather boast earned beauty in their simplicity.

After Mr. Chow seeks lodging in the same apartment building, a sharp contrast develops between his unseen wife and Mrs. Chan. At work, Mr. Chow converses with his boisterous friend, Ah Ping, who informs him that “if [his] wife wasn't so attractive, she'd be a worried woman—“ a blameless victim of the rampant adultery which pervaded their culture in the 1960s. Yet when it becomes evident over the course of the film that Mr. Chow's wife is cheating on him (with Mrs. Chan's husband, no less), the question of her beauty in comparison to Mrs. Chan's arises. As opposed to Mrs. Chow utilization of her attractiveness as a tool to invite infidelity, Mrs. Chan's quiet beauty emphasizes her firm refusal to be “like them,” meaning the countless numbers of individuals engaging in the cultural practice of openly cheating on their spouses.

Later at work, Mrs. Chan routinely phones her boss' wife with a phony alibi for his sexual caprices, and shortly thereafter she suspects her husband is having an affair with Mrs. Chow. In the face of such open adultery in all aspects of her day-to-day life, the return of her colorful

floral dress at work reaffirms her unwavering commitment to her values. This marks the first time in the film that one of her dresses is noticeably worn again, and Mrs. Chan simultaneously complements her boss' new tie and winks at the audience, explaining, "You notice things if you pay attention." Like the suspicious residents of her apartment, who question her glamorous choice of attire for a quick trip to the local rice-and-noodle shop, the viewer takes note of her subtle employment of beauty and clothing to attract the attention of Mr. Chow. This suspicion becomes heightened when the floral dress appears for the *third time* in the first half hour of the film, when she and Mr. Chow begin their platonic affair over dinner together. Her choice of dresses seems so nonchalant and routine, yet practically begs for the slightest note of attention.

After several more dinner dates together, her imperceptible advances result in Mr. Chow making the first move, grabbing her hand and suggesting that they stay out a little longer (and presumably consummate their affections). Yet Kar-wai bewilders the viewer by shooting the scene again in the exact same way, yet having Mrs. Chan make the first proposition. "Someone must have made the first move," both Mr. Chow and the audience wonder aloud. But this succession of scenes suggests that neither one of them is at fault for igniting a flame between the two. One could argue that it also suggests that they are both at fault, but as Mrs. Chan asserts, "It doesn't matter who made the first move." If the viewer can believe that she is a flower, the commencement of their affair can be likened to someone bending to smell a rose, but leaving it untouched and pure. And anyway, as Mr. Chow blankly explains later in the film, "Feelings can creep up just like that." The two lovers acknowledge one another's beauty and admit attraction, but never truly sink to the level of their spouses' infidelity.

The fourth and final return of the blue-and-red flowered dress marks a new stage of Mrs. Chan's relationship with Mr. Chow. After narrowly avoiding being caught by the other residents

spending time in Mr. Chow's apartment, the lovers walk through abandoned city streets, when Mr. Chow admits he is looking for another small apartment somewhere, hoping to avoid gossip. Not only does the dress help the viewer chronicle the relationship (calling to mind the very first scene of the film), but also it symbolizes the development of Mrs. Chan into a self-sufficient, blossoming woman. As the camera pans sideways, focusing intently on her midsection, the viewer watches her wring her hands in agitation at the prospect of moving into a hotel room with Mr. Chow, under the guise of collaborating on martial arts serial writing. Rather than submit to his subtle suggestions, Mrs. Chan assumes control of her passions, telling him, "You don't need me. You can write on your own," before walking away in a cold huff. When asked to come see him for the first time in a few days in his hotel room, she rushes over in anticipation, only to collect herself upon arriving, saying, "We won't be like them" before she leaves him alone. Consequently, they are able to enjoy one another's company immensely for quite some time afterward, never crossing the line that delineates symbiotic friendship and tawdry infidelity.

From there, the unlimited possibilities and unremitting excitement of a new relationship begin to dwindle, as society begins to infringe on the lovers' peace of mind. Gossip spreads, co-workers take note of their shared phone calls and Mrs. Suen reproaches Mrs. Chan for her supposed philandering. As a result, Mrs. Chan firmly distances herself from Mr. Chow and stays home for a night. While Mrs. Suen and the other residents play mahjong obliviously, Mrs. Chan gazes longingly out the window as her frame is enveloped by a visual bouquet of flowers. She wears a different flowery dress, standing beside a floral-patterned curtain and a flowery lampshade, as the camera peers at her through bushes in bloom. Mrs. Chan's ability to blend in with her surroundings suggests she has reached a point where she begins to bloom—she realizes that though it may feel like a tragic waste, she must move past her attraction to Mr. Chow and

maintain her purity and elegance.

Ultimately, the two must rehearse their final intimate interaction before their spouses return, a rehearsal which in the presentation of the film functions as an actual parting of ways. As the two lean in melancholy against the wall that divides their rooms, a voice on the radio announces that Mr. Chan sends his birthday wishes to his wife from Japan, accompanied by Zhou Xuan's song "Full Bloom." Ironically, the song indicates a sense of growth at a time when the once strong connection between Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan begins to die. Much like the function of Mrs. Chan's uniquely floral dress is to mark the passage of time, Mrs. Chan's birthday emphasizes a reflection on one's past. Birthdays occur on the same day each year, but each day is unique; dresses are worn frequently throughout the year, but each experience is different; the same flowers bloom in the same place year after year, but no two years are identical. If Mrs. Chan looks back on the last few weeks, she realizes that at this time of the day she would likely be at the diner with Mr. Chow, or holed up writing serials in his hotel room, or in some way sharing a blissful moment with him. But now comes the time of her rebirth, in which she can collect her bearings and attempt to move forward.

However, Mr. Chow accepts a job in Singapore, and when he phones Mrs. Chan *literally* at the eleventh hour asking if she will move away with him, she breaks her resolve and races to his hotel room. Unfortunately, she only just misses him, and the two never meet again. One may challenge that Mrs. Chan in fact does not imitate the quiet, casual grace of a flower because she repeatedly rushes to Mr. Chow's hotel room when beckoned. While this is true, it should be noted that whenever she loses her cool head and acts impulsively out of desperation or passion, she always collects herself out of Mr. Chow's sight (or misses him completely). To his knowledge, she still retains that innate beauty of an unassuming flower, never betraying her morals and

succumbing to his charms. “You'll never leave your husband,” Mr. Chow laments aloud at one point, revealing Mrs. Chan's begrudging commitment to the social mores of the time. It would be imprudent of her to leave her husband and influence Mr. Chow to leave his wife so they could run off and be together, thereby cheapening their affair by sexually and commonly consummating it. Mr. Chow never explicitly sees her act out in a moment of weakness. Even when he discovers that she visited his place in Singapore the following year, he understands that she still could not betray her husband the same way she was once betrayed.

Although Mrs. Chan never could leave her husband for Mr. Chow, once she experiences the heartbreaking and formative rise and fall of their affair, she begins to bloom and take charge of her own life. When she appears again in Hong Kong in 1966, she moves back into the old apartment with her son, with no mention of her husband ever uttered. One of her neighbors informs Mr. Chow that only “some woman and her son” occupy the room now, which leads the viewer to posit that either her husband left her, or more comforting, she left her husband. While that situation is not ideal in the slightest, it helps to believe that she might have quit standing idly by as her husband openly cheated on her. Knowing there still exists a love in this world like the one she shared with Mr. Chow, Mrs. Chan could conceivably cut off her attachment to her husband and start looking again for love in the proper context, or even settle for a relatively comfortable existence as a single mother. The fact that she takes over the room upon Mrs. Suen's final departure draws a connection between the two women. Mrs. Suen never makes mention of a husband, and one is never seen. She too has children, who are working in America, a place which promises hope and new life, especially during such a historically volatile time period in southeast Asia. Mrs. Chan essentially fills in for Mrs. Suen's vacancy.

Wong Kar-wai's working title for *In the Mood for Love* was *Hua Yang De Nian Hua*,

which is a Chinese saying that translates to “the age of blossoms,” a phrase which aptly summarizes Mrs. Chan's transformation throughout the course of the film. She enters the story a quiet bud and blossoms into a stronger woman as radiant as the roses which bloom in perpetuation on her dress. In a way, her growth reflects the turbulent nature of Hong Kong in the mid-1960s, as alluded to in the film's final few chapters. What starts out as a relatively tame culture experiences a heightened state of affairs not unlike the escalation of Mrs. Chan's and Mr. Chow's relationship, then emerges war-weary, ready for a change. Though it may seem the dissolution of the lovers' relationship is a great loss to Mrs. Chan, the experience allows her to learn about a stronger kind of love than the kind between broken couples like the Chans and Chows which were so common in society at the time.

Works Cited

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